

# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background of Study

*Minari* (2020) is set in the 1980s, inspired by the true story of the childhood of Lee Isaac Chung as a writer and director of this film, when he settled in the United States and survived solely on *minari* (a type of parsley typical of South Korea). This Oscar-winning film tells the story of a South Korean family consisting of a grandmother (Soonja), father (Jacob Yi), mother (Monica Yi), older sister (Anne Yi), and younger brother (David Yi) who must face a different environment, way of life, and language when the father (Jacob) is determined to move his family to a village in Arkansas, United States. He created a farm on uncultivated land there and sacrificed many things. Various conflicts within the household arose from economic deprivation, unsuccessful farming, and limited language skills.

Nevertheless, Jacob stayed in America for a better future, just like the determination of more than 1 million Koreans who immigrated to the United States. According to the [AAPI Data's AANHPI Community Counts Dashboard](#), the Korean American population reached 1,508,575 in 2020 (the fifth largest single-origin Asian group in the country), plus 480,944 multiracial individuals, for a total of nearly 1,989,519. The size of this community shows that interaction between Korean and English is intense and continuous whether in the family, education, or work spheres.

This phenomenon of cross-border migration has led to increasingly complex linguistic encounters. When two languages with very different sound systems interact, phonological clashes are often unavoidable. This process has long attracted the attention of linguists, including Uriel Weinreich, who emphasized the importance of understanding phonological interference as deviations in the pronunciation of a second language due to the influence of the first language (Weinreich, 1979). This phenomenon is not just a matter of accent, but a concrete manifestation of how sound systems influence each other in situations of language contact.

With this context in mind, *Minari* (2020) becomes particularly interesting. A number of recent studies also show an increasing academic interest in the film *Minari* (2020) from various perspectives, such as AI-based translation analysis (Koh, 2023), semiotics and discourse studies (Faisal & Putri, 2023; Sari et al., 2023), and sociocultural approaches to Korean-American diaspora identity (Uzuner, 2021 & Fauziyah, 2024). These findings confirm that *Minari* is a valuable and relevant subject of study. Nevertheless, these studies have not yet highlighted the segmental phonology and phonetic realization of English speech by Korean bilingual speakers, thus opening up a field of linguistic research that has yet to be explored in depth.

The English words used in the Yi family's dialogue are phonetic realizations produced by Korean-English bilingual actors, which naturally reflect their authentic pronunciation patterns. This provides data on phonological interference, which can be studied to reveal patterns of vowel and consonant

deviation and the phonological process behind them. This research specifically focuses on identifying differences in the pronunciation of English words by actors playing members of the Yi family compared to the standard pronunciation in the Cambridge Dictionary (AmE) because it provides a consistent and academically recognised phonetic transcription system, which is particularly useful in linguistic and pronunciation studies. The pronunciation differences are classified according to Uriel Weinreich's (1979) theory of phonological interference. This study is limited to vowel and consonant errors in each word and excludes the analysis of suprasegmental features (e.g., word stress, tone, and intonation).

## **1.2 Research Problem**

The study poses the following research questions in light of the study's background:

1. What types of phonological interference are produced by the bilingual actors portraying the Yi family in *Minari* (2020) based on Weinreich's (1979) theory?
2. What phonological processes are found in the pronunciation differences within the most frequent type of phonological interference?

## **1.3 Objectives of the Study**

This study aims to identify and explain instances of phonological interference from Korean to English as produced by the bilingual actors portraying the Yi family in *Minari* (2020). Although the film's dialogue is

scripted, the phonetic realization of the actors' pronunciation remains authentic to their Korean-English bilingual background. Specifically, this study seeks to:

1. Classify each vowel and consonant pronunciation differences into four types of phonological interference according to Weinreich's (1979) theory.
2. Analyze the phonological processes found in the most frequent type of phonological interference using distinctive features.

#### **1.4 Previous Studies**

Research on the impact of Korean phonology on second language learning has developed thematically since the early 2000s. Several studies have shown that there is phonological interference when Korean speakers learn English, as demonstrated by Kuehn et al. (2009) in *Characteristics of Korean Phonology: Review, Tutorial, and Case Studies of Korean Children Speaking English*, which examined how Korean phonological features affect the English production of Korean children (e.g., nasal consonants and the three-level vowel system). Using case studies and speech production analysis, they found significant negative transfer, especially in final consonants. Their conclusion emphasizes the need for phonetic intervention, but the study's weakness lies in its relatively small sample size, meaning that the interference patterns identified cannot be generalized and may be individual in nature. Then by Lee, Cho, & Park (2010) in *Interference of L1 Phonological Processes in English Learning* used conversation analysis and identified that L1 phonological processes (e.g., aspiration adjustment) often interfere with English consonant production. Their findings are consistent with

Kuehn et al. (2009) and add a broader quantitative perspective through the measurement of phonemic accuracy.

Furthermore, Wang, Park, & Lee (2006) in *Korean-English Biliteracy Acquisition: Cross-Language Phonological and Orthographic Transfer*, which examined phonological and orthographic transfer through reading and writing tests. The results showed helpful phonological transfer, but also orthographic confusion. This study was strong in its longitudinal design, but limited to literacy, not segmental phonological production in natural speech.

Then Yuniar (2013) researched *Korean Phonological Interference in Indonesian Language as Second Language* and found that Korean speakers had difficulty distinguishing Indonesian back vowels (a, o, u) due to the three-level vowel pattern in Korean. The method used was auditory perception and oral production tests, with results showing a decrease in accuracy at the intermediate level. The strength of this study is its focus on Indonesian as an L2, but its weakness is that it does not include longitudinal data. Although the linguistic context is different, this study supports the view that phonological interference in Korean speakers is structural and can appear in various second languages.

Subsequently, Lee & Iverson (2009) in *Vowel development in English and Korean: Similarities and differences in linguistic and non-linguistic factors* examined vowel development through acoustic analysis in two age groups. They found that non-linguistic factors (e.g., media exposure) moderated differences in vowel development. The study's strength lies in its use of robust acoustic data; however, it does not explore pedagogical implications in depth. Further, Son

(2020) tested cross-linguistic syntactic priming in Korean learners of English through an eye-tracking experiment. The results showed that structural priming can reduce L1 interference, opening up opportunities for priming-based teaching approaches. The main weakness was the lack of variation in the participants' proficiency levels.

In response, recent research has been done on AI technology by Koh (2023) in *An Analysis of ChatGPT's Language Translation Based on the Korean Film Minari*, which evaluated ChatGPT's translation performance of the *Minari* film dialogue. The method involved comparing human vs. AI translations using the BLEU metric. The findings revealed high accuracy in lexical structure but were still weak in cultural nuances. The strength of the study is its practical relevance, while its limitation is its focus on only one film.

The semiotic study of Faisal & Putri's film (2023) in *Semiotic Analysis of the Film 'Minari'* and Katuuk et. al. (2023) in *The Meaning of Speech of Korean Minari Movie Casts a Study of Semiotics and its Implementation in Learning Indonesian Language* highlight how the visual and audio symbolism of films can be used as pedagogical material for learning Indonesian. Both studies use discourse and semiotics analysis, showing the potential for integrating film media into the language curriculum, but both are still limited to descriptive analysis without empirical testing.

Lastly, studies by Uzuner (2021) *Lee Isaac Chung, Minari (2020): Having an Amerikorean Life* and Fauziyah et. al. (2024) in *Creating a Home Elsewhere: Diasporic Imagination in Lee Isaac Chung's Minari* broaden the perspective of

Korean-American diaspora culture, examining hybrid identities through a sociocultural approach. Qualitative methods, such as interviews and text analysis, provide insights into the dynamics of identity that can be used as a conceptual background in language research. The main weakness is the focus on cultural context and the lack of examination of segmental phonology, so that the linguistic implications remain implicit.

Thus, the gap filled by this study is the absence of research that integrates Weinreich's classical framework with contemporary data based on the natural phonetic realizations produced by Korean-English bilingual actors. This study will make an original contribution by mapping phonological interference patterns in detail along with the structural factors that cause them and explaining the phonological process that appears, thereby bridging the gap between language contact theory and empirical evidence from actual pronunciation practices.

### **1.5 Scope of the Study**

This study will specifically analyze the differences in dialogue in the pronunciation of vowels and consonants produced by the actors portraying members of the Yi family, without touching on suprasegmental aspects such as word stress, pitch, or intonation. All the differences are classified into the four types of phonological interference proposed by Weinreich (1979). However, a phonological process analysis using distinctive features is only applicable to cases within the most dominant type of phonological interference. These limitations were imposed to maintain the research's focus and allow for a more in-depth

analysis of the data, given the wide range of phonological processes found in the research subjects' speech.

### **1.6 Significance of the Study**

This research opens up new contributions relevant to several fields:

- Theoretical: Testing the relevance of Weinreich's phonic interference framework in the context of the Korean-American diaspora.
- Empirical: Providing a natural corpus containing 79 pronunciation data that can be used in phonology and second language acquisition studies.
- Practical and sociocultural: Providing insights for English teachers and diaspora identity studies related to the distinctive pronunciation patterns of Korean speakers.

Thus, this research is worthwhile because it connects fresh empirical data with proven linguistic theory and contributes to a deeper understanding of cross-linguistic sound interactions in today's multilingual societies.

### **1.7 Writing Organisation**

This research is organized into four chapters. The first chapter presents a research framework that leads to the subsequent chapters, which provide the study's background, research problem, objectives of the study, previous studies, scope of the study, significance of the study, and writing organisation. The second chapter contains the theories used in this study and the research method that explains the type of research, data, and data sources, methods of collecting data,

and methods of analyzing data. Then, Chapter Three presents data on identified phonological interference. The data are then analyzed for the phonological processes they contain. Also, the last chapter is the conclusion of the study and a suggestion for future researchers to continue the research on phonological interference.

